

Rules of the Game

Familiars (Part Four)

By Skip Williams



Last week, we concluded our look at a familiar's powers and abilities, then considered how familiars function as creatures and just how one goes about acquiring a familiar in the first place. This week, we'll examine the challenges of protecting a familiar during combat and consider what happens to the surviving member of the pair when a master or familiar dies.

Familiars in Combat

Most masters usually avoid physical combat, which is a very good idea. When you have your familiar along, it's even more important to stay out of harm's way. Even when you're a high-level **character**, your familiar is easy prey for any foe powerful enough to challenge you.



Perhaps the best protection you can offer your familiar while adventuring is to leave the familiar at home or at least in camp. Not only does this strategy keep the familiar safe from the perils you face, it also leaves a trustworthy sentinel in charge. The familiar can keep watch over your goods and defend them if necessary. Even if the familiar cannot prevent a raid on your abode, it can provide you with valuable information about the event (in the form of an eyewitness account given to the best of the familiar's ability) or even shadow the trespassers back to their base.

If you remain within a mile of your familiar, you can get instant warning about any trouble thanks to the empathic link between master and familiar. Due to the limited nature of the link (see Part Two), you'll need to be prepared for false alarms. If you range farther afield, you can use scrying to keep up to date. The familiar provides an easy subject for the scrying attempt, and if you are 13th level or higher, you can scry on the familiar once a day without recourse to a spell or a scrying device.

Protection from Physical Threats

Even with its increased **Armor Class** and **hit points**, a familiar is even more vulnerable to **melee** and **ranged attacks** than you are. Since most familiars are size **Tiny** or smaller, the familiar can share your space. This doesn't provide the familiar with **cover** or any special defense, but at least you'll be on hand to intervene if the familiar gets into trouble. You might want to consider letting your familiar use you as a mount. If it does so, it can make a Ride check to claim cover (+4 to Armor Class) for 1 round. This is "soft" cover, and the familiar does not get a bonus on **Reflex saves** while claiming cover from you. The familiar cannot attack while claiming cover from you, but that's usually not a problem. Remember that if you have the Ride skill, the familiar can use your ranks (and its **Dexterity** score) to make Ride checks.



You can try to conceal your familiar inside a cloak or big pocket. Remember, however, that even a Tiny creature can create a considerable bulge. (Imagine what you'd look like when trying to carry a cat under your shirt.) When you're carrying your familiar in this fashion, your foes can still attack it. Use the rules for sundering a carried item. The attack provokes an **attack of opportunity** from you if you threaten the attacker. Use the familiar's Armor Class and your Dexterity modifier. Because the familiar is concealed in your clothing, the attack against it has a 50% **miss chance**.

From page 158 of the *Player's Handbook*:

SUNDER

You can use a melee attack with a slashing or bludgeoning weapon to strike a weapon or shield that your opponent is holding. If you're attempting to sunder a weapon or shield, follow the steps outlined here. (Attacking held objects other than weapons or shields is covered below.)

Step 1: Attack of Opportunity. You provoke an attack of opportunity from the target whose weapon or shield you are trying to sunder. (If you have the Improved Sunder feat, you don't incur an attack of opportunity for making the attempt.)

Step 2: Opposed Rolls. You and the defender make opposed attack rolls with your respective weapons. The wielder of a twohanded weapon on a sunder attempt gets a +4 bonus on this roll, and the wielder of a light weapon takes a -4 penalty. If the combatants are of different sizes, the larger combatant gets a bonus on the attack roll of +4 per difference in size category.

Step 3: Consequences. If you beat the defender, you have landed a good blow. Roll damage and deal it to the weapon or shield. See Table 8-8: Common Armor, Weapon, and Shield Hardness and Hit Points to determine how much damage you must deal to destroy the weapon or shield.

If you fail the sunder attempt, you don't deal any damage.

Sundering a Carried or Worn Object: You don't use an opposed attack roll to damage a carried or worn object. Instead, just make an attack roll against the object's AC. A carried or worn object's AC is equal to

10 + its size modifier + the Dexterity modifier of the carrying or wearing character. Attacking a carried or worn object provokes an attack of opportunity just as attacking a held object does. To attempt to snatch away an item worn by a defender (such as a cloak or a pair of goggles) rather than damage it, see *Disarm*, page 155. You can't sunder armor worn by another character.

A familiar concealed in your clothing is still subject to magical attacks, including area attacks that affect you. Normally things you carry aren't affected by area attacks unless you roll a **natural 1** on your saving throw (see page 177 in the *Player's Handbook*); however, a familiar is a creature, not just a piece of equipment.

You also can carry a box or other container where the familiar can hide and claim total cover against all forms of attack. The table below gives statistics for such familiar carriers. All these carriers have latches inside and out that the familiar can operate. It takes the familiar a **move action** to enter or leave the carrier.

Familiar Carriers

Familiar Size[1] Cost[2] Weight Hardness Hit Points Break DC

| | | | | | |
|------------|--------|----------|---|----|----|
| Fine | 8 gp | 8 lbs. | 5 | 5 | 23 |
| Diminutive | 15 gp | 18 lbs. | 5 | 7 | 23 |
| Tiny | 30 gp | 40 lbs. | 5 | 9 | 23 |
| Small | 60 gp | 90 lbs. | 5 | 11 | 23 |
| Medium | 120 gp | 200 lbs. | 5 | 15 | 23 |

1 A carrier's size as an object is the same as the size of the familiar for which it is made.

2 For an extra cost a carrier can be made airtight and watertight; see below.

A familiar carrier has a handle and straps so it can be carried in the hand or strapped to the back. For an extra 20% of the base cost (or an extra 10 gp, whichever is higher), a carrier can be airtight and watertight. A familiar sealed inside such a carrier can breathe for 30 minutes before suffering the effects of suffocation.

The careful master also provides his familiar with defensive magic. The ability to share spells makes this easy to do. Spells such as *blink*, *blur*, *displacement*, *mage armor*, and *mirror image* provide protection for both you and your familiar. You can get double duty from most of these spells by casting them on yourself and sharing them with your familiar (see Part Two). If you plan to have your familiar operate more than 5 feet away from you, however, it's best to simply cast these spells on your familiar. Remember that you can cast a spell with a target entry of "you" on your familiar instead of on yourself (see Part Two).

Protection from Magical Threats

Area spells probably are the biggest threats to a familiar's long-term survival. Fortunately, most area spells allow Reflex saving throws for half **damage**, and a familiar's improved evasion ability often allows the familiar to escape damage from an area spell altogether with a successful save and take only half damage even if it fails its save.

Unfortunately, a failed save can still be deadly to a familiar because it does not have very many hit points. Anything that improves the familiar's Reflex saves improves its chance to survive. Some cover (see the previous

section on physical threats) grants the familiar a +2 bonus on Reflex saves, so keep your familiar close by unless you have good reason to have it elsewhere.

Spells that provide protection from attacks provide good protection against your familiar's occasional failed Reflex save. *Protection from energy* can be very effective in this regard, but you have to correctly guess what types of attacks you will encounter. Fortunately, this spell can be shared. If you expect a prolonged battle, you would do well to cast *minor globe of invulnerability* or *globe of invulnerability*. These spells create immobile spheres that exclude hostile spell effects while allowing you to cast your own spells without hindrance. Of course, if you or the familiar has to move, the protection is lost, but the spells are very effective so long as you can afford to stand your ground.

Effects that fill an area or affect multiple targets, but do not allow Reflex saves, are particularly dangerous to familiars, and there are more of these than you might think: *acid fog*, *cloudkill*, *horrid wilting*, *sound burst*, *shout*, *magic missile*, the various *power word* spells, and *wail of the banshee*, just to name a few. Many of these spells are high level, so you probably don't need to worry about them too much -- at least not right away. On the other hand, if you do have to face them, otherwise reliable defenses won't be effective. For example, *minor globe of invulnerability* cannot stop spells higher than 3rd level, and spells such as *protection from energy* won't stop *horrid wilting*. One defensive spell that offers some protection is *spell resistance*, which is worth casting even if your familiar already has **spell resistance** (because the spell probably provides better spell resistance than your familiar has). Best of all, you and your familiar can share the *spell resistance* spell. If you know what spells you'll face, getting the party cleric to cast *spell immunity* or *greater spell immunity* on your familiar can be very effective, as can casting *protection from spells*.

You will occasionally encounter foes who employ spells such as *magic missile*, *charm monster*, or *finger of death* to attack your familiar directly. It can be difficult to defend against these assaults, but the tips in the previous paragraph are effective here, too.

Having your familiar charmed can be most inconvenient, but it need not be a disaster. Any time your familiar makes a successful save against a charm or compulsion spell (or against any other spell without a visible effect), you'll know it if the familiar is within one mile -- the hostile force or tingle that it felt when making the successful save can be communicated over the empathic link. If your familiar fails a save against a charm or compulsion effect, you'll immediately know something is wrong if you're within one mile (the change in the familiar's thinking is detectable through the empathic link). There's little you can do if your familiar falls under a compulsion effect. If the familiar is within reach, you can try to grab it and hold on before it can hurt itself or do something you don't like. Or you can try to dispel the effect. Charm effects are easier to deal with. If someone charms your familiar and you give the familiar a contradictory order, the familiar gets a new saving throw (provided the spell affecting the familiar allows a new save when the subject is ordered to do something that's against its nature). Sometimes, a master will wish to be rid of a familiar, usually because the familiar has suffered some debilitating injury or because the master simply wishes to acquire a new familiar. To dismiss a familiar, the master simply wills it so, though breaking the link that binds the two is a **full-round action**.

Dismissing a Familiar

Immediately upon completing the dismissal, the master must succeed on a DC 15 **Fortitude saving throw** to avoid losing **experience points** as noted on page 54 of the *Player's Handbook*. Immediately on being dismissed, the familiar loses all familiar abilities and becomes a normal creature of its kind. It suffers no other ill effects, except that its reduced Intelligence score most likely makes it unable to remember most of what it experienced as a familiar.

Once a master dismisses a familiar, he cannot obtain a new one for a year and a day.

Death of a Familiar

When a familiar dies, the master must succeed on a DC 15 Fortitude saving throw to avoid losing experience points as noted in page 54 of the *Player's Handbook*. The master cannot obtain a new familiar for a year and a day. Most familiars can be raised from the dead. (If the familiar is of the **elemental** or **outsider type**, it takes a *wish* or *miracle* spell to bring it back from the dead.)

Bringing back the familiar from the dead reestablishes the link between master and familiar; however, the *reincarnate* spell is an exception. The spell brings back the familiar as an independent being and the resulting creature is no longer a familiar.

No matter how the familiar returns from the dead, the process does not erase the experience loss the master suffers. The familiar does not suffer any level or **Constitution** loss. If the master's experience loss has reduced the master's level, however, the familiar's abilities are reduced accordingly.

Death of a Master

If the master dies, and the familiar survives, it loses all abilities associated with being a familiar (as if it had been dismissed). As a house rule, you might want to delay the familiar's loss of abilities for a short time, say one day per level of the master.

If the master is later brought back from the dead, the familiar has whatever abilities that go along with the master's new level.

Familiars and Magic Items

A great way to both protect your familiar and perhaps give it some offensive power is to equip it with magic items. Consider purchasing items for your familiar or just give it items you no longer need (such as your *+1 ring of protection* when you acquire a *+2 ring of protection*).

Once you do so, however, you and your DM face a potentially difficult decision. Exactly which items can familiars use? Since most magic items fit users of any size, the simple answer is that it can use pretty much any item. No familiar can use an item that requires spell completion or spell knowledge because they are not spellcasters. Likewise, most familiars cannot speak, so they can't use command word items (the ability to speak with the master doesn't count). Familiars usually lack prehensile appendages, so they cannot employ weapons, either. What does that leave? That leaves potions (though you may have to open the potion vial and pour out the liquid),

From the Sorcerer Entry (*Player's Handbook*, page 54):

If the familiar dies or is dismissed by the sorcerer, the sorcerer must attempt a DC 15 Fortitude saving throw. Failure means he loses 200 experience points per sorcerer level; success reduces the loss to one-half that amount. However, a sorcerer's experience point total can never go below 0 as the result of a familiar's demise or dismissal. For example, suppose that Hennet is a 3rd-level sorcerer with 3,230 XP when his owl familiar is killed by a bugbear. Hennet makes a successful saving throw, so he loses 300 XP, dropping him below 3,000 XP and back to 2nd level (see the *Dungeon Master's Guide* for rules for losing levels). A slain or dismissed familiar cannot be replaced for a year and day. A slain familiar can be raised from the dead just as a character can be, and it does not lose a level or a Constitution point when this happy event occurs.



rings, and most items that can be worn or carried. Your DM may decide that your familiar's body type simply will not allow some items to fit your familiar. For example, you might persuade your DM to let your cat wear boots, citing the tale of "Puss in Boots" as an example, but don't count on your snake wearing boots. Creatures like owls and bats may have a hard time with cloaks (since the garment interferes with their wings). All familiars have item locations similar to those found on a humanoid character, though the items worn there might have a considerably different shape. For example, a quadruped uses its back feet for the "foot" location and its front feet for the "hand" location. The hind legs correspond to a humanoid's legs and the front legs correspond to a humanoid's arms. For avians, treat the feet and legs as hands and arms and the wings as legs and feet. (If your familiar is a winged humanoid or winged quadruped, such as an imp or pseudodragon, its wings do not provide extra locations for magic items. The creature can wear "leg" items on its wings or hind legs, but not both.) A snake simply wears items over its head or body. In most cases, even if your familiar can't use an item you've found, it should be possible to make (or have made) an item your familiar can use. For example, you might fashion *wing bands of speed* for your bat or hawk's wings, and they would work just like *boots of speed* for your familiar.

For an in depth look at what items an animal can use or wear, check out [Wild Life](#).

In Conclusion

That wraps up our look at familiars. I hope I've helped answer a few of your questions on this topic.

About the Author

Skip Williams keeps busy with freelance projects for several different game companies and was the Sage of **Dragon Magazine** for many years. Skip is a co-designer of the **D&D** 3rd Edition game and the chief architect of the *Monster Manual*. When not devising swift and cruel deaths for player characters, Skip putters in his kitchen or garden (rabbits and deer are not Skip's friends) or works on repairing and improving the century-old farmhouse that he shares with his wife, Penny, and a growing menagerie of pets.

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